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Time for Ontario to switch focus from COVID to economic issues; Comment: Real progress has been made on pandemic

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Body

The Ontario government, media and the public have paid attention to little else but COVID-19 for the last year and a half; now that the province is making real progress on the virus, it's time to switch focus to Ontario's significant and fundamental economic problems.

While there are disturbing increases in case numbers elsewhere in the country, Ontario continues its gentle downward curve. Hospitalization numbers are stable and death numbers are low. Last week, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore announced big increases in the number of fans allowed at indoor and outdoor sporting events, moving them up to 50 per cent and 75 per cent of capacity, respectively. The usual predictions of doom were largely absent and the fact that nearly 30,000 Blue Jays fans came out to games this week shows that public fear is abating.

Then there is this week's modelling from the province's science advisory table. Just a month ago, the modellers predicted a frightening surge of cases this fall. There could be 4,000 cases a day by the start of October, they said, maybe even 9,000.

The modellers' latest predictions have reduced those numbers considerably, although they haven't given up on doomsday just yet. The latest projections are like a weather forecast that predicts a mix of sun and cloud with a chance of showers. If the provincial government were to eliminate most remaining public-health restrictions, cases could go to 5,000 a day by the end of November, the modellers project. The odds of the ultracautious Doug Ford government doing that are nil. More likely, the modellers say, cases could go up to 1,500 a day by the beginning of November. Or perhaps, there might only be a few hundred cases a day if people are careful.

The latest projections were interesting not just for the big change in numbers, but for how the news was delivered. Rather than the usual media event with scientists speaking in scary tones, the latest modelling was just posted on the science table's website.

Schools are a remaining area of concern for Ontarians, but in a briefing Wednesday, Moore was upbeat in his assessment of how they are doing so far. "In-school transmission has been minimal and well-contained," Moore said. There have been 153 outbreaks in schools, with 75 per cent of them involving three or fewer cases. So far, the fear of a disastrous return to school has not materialized.

Maybe all of this is just a lull, but it would be smart for Ontarians to start paying attention to some of the problems that will be around long after the virus itself recedes.

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When the election rolls around next spring, Ford's PCs will no doubt run their campaign on jobs and the economy, full of cheerful talk about how the government is going to rev up the economy to levels we've never seen. But there are two big impediments to that, and it's time to start dealing with them.

Provincial governments are accustomed to using the unemployment rate as a gauge of economic success, but the worrying thing now is the labour shortage. Statistics Canada recorded 291,000 vacant jobs in Ontario in June.

A Business Development Bank of Canada survey this week found that 64 per cent of entrepreneurs nationally say their company's growth is limited by the labour shortage, meaning longer hours for them and their employees and an inability to meet customer demand.

Ontario is not only short of labour volume, it has a skills misfit. The provincial government is trying to address that by spending more than \$200 million on skills development and \$61 million on recruitment, retention and training of nurses, the most pressing shortage in the public sector.

Not only is Ontario short of people, it has a problem with power, too. The aging Pickering nuclear reactor will be shut down in 2025. Pickering produces 14 per cent of Ontario's power. It's a big loss and one that will be replaced in the short term by power from Ontario's underutilized natural gas plants, a change sure to ignite complaints from climate change activists.

Ontario's power problem is compounded by the government policy of subsidizing residential power bills. This year, it will spend \$6.5 billion on that unproductive policy, which started under the Liberals.

Ontario needs a big discussion on what economic growth we can expect, what our priorities are, and how we will get the power and people to make it all happen. This is the issue that the PCs should want the 2022 election to be about. They'd be smart to step up their efforts now.

Randall Denley is an Ottawa political commentator, author and former Ontario PC candidate. Contact him at randalldenley1@gmail.com !@COPYRIGHT=© 2021 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Graphic

Lars Hagberg , The Canadian Press Files; With COVID-19 numbers trending downward and fourth wave cases lower than forecast, there are two big impediments to helping small business recover, Randall Denley writes: a labour shortage and a skills mismatch.;

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